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Two Books that Will Contribute to Your Happiness

David Schelhaas

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Abstract

"In my recent past, two books of poems appeared in my mailbox, free, unsolicited, both filled with wonderful poems."

Posting about two books of poetry from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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in all things

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Standing With Alyosha
by Mark Hiskes

Final Exam: Poems About Teachers and Their Students
by J. Barry Koops

When is the last time you bought a collection of poems—not because you were required to buy it for a class, but because you wanted it? I recall, years ago, reading an article in which poet and English teacher Stephen Dunning reported that in an informal survey he discovered most of his former English majors had never purchased a book of poetry after they left college.

According to poet Dana Gioia, "American poetry is locked into a series of exhausted conventions—outmoded ways of presenting, discussing, editing, and teaching poetry. Educational institutions have codified them into a stifling bureaucratic etiquette that enervates the art."

Poet Billy Collins, one of today's most popular poets, elaborates on this idea in his poem, "Introduction to Poetry." He writes that his students, when given a poem, want to "tie the poem to a chair with a rope/and torture a confession out of it." Instead, Collins playfully suggests that they "drop a mouse in a poem/and watch him probe his way out," or "press an ear against its hive," or do four or five other casual things with it.

“The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man’s happiness,” said Wallace Stevens, one of America’s greatest (and most enigmatic) 20th century poets. There are as many definitions of poetry as there are poets, but right now, I like this one as long as we expand the meaning of happiness: Happiness as something that emerges from beauty, paradox, understanding, from wonder and mystery and worship. Even from sadness (The first time I encountered the literary device oxymoron was the phrase “happy sadness” in a Hawthorne short story.).

In my recent past, two books of poems appeared in my mailbox, free, unsolicited, both filled with wonderful poems.

When the first book came, I had been expecting it. A high school student of mine from forty years ago had emailed me to say he was sending a book of poems, *Standing with Alyosha*, written by his college roommate, Mark Hiskes—now a teacher at Holland Christian High School. It was a wonderful gift! As a long time Christian high school English teacher, I was acquainted with some of the territory Hiskes travels in his poems. I have been reading *Standing with Alyosha* for several months now, off and on, and it has been a rewarding walk through a high school English teacher’s classroom and his life. It contains poems that I love, and that I love to read again.

The first section of poems is called “The Work of Axes: Literature and Life.” In these poems, Hiskes uses various works of literature as starting points for poems. His “What I’d Tell Hamlet” is a marvelous rambling reflection on the character of young Prince Hamlet and what Hiskes would advise him to do. And that, as you might guess, is “be,” which, after all, is the question. References to major writers—Shakespeare, Donne, Frost, Salinger, Charlotte Bronte, Peter De Vries—appear in many of these poems.

Any husband who loves his wife will be moved to tears by his poems written to or about his wife as she endures cancer treatments. The last line of “In Sickness” takes your breath away: “The long day’s ordinary love/ is more alive than any cancer.” So many of the poems are so wise. Not didactically wise like much of the book of Proverbs, but wise in the knowledge of the heart—in the recognition of what is lovely and true.

In the title poem, for example, Hiskes takes one sentence from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*—“Alyosha stood at the crossroads under the streetlamp”—and creates from that image “light enough to glimpse/the willing figure love makes or/the long shivering shadow of its retreat.” It is a thread that he weaves through many of these poems and, one can surmise, one he passes on to his students again and again.

It is clear from these poems that Hiskes is not one of those English teachers that loves his literary characters more than his students. As he prepares to teach *The Catcher in*

the Rye, he suddenly realizes that he will not teach the part where Holden talks of suicide because she will be sitting there, the girl whose younger brother had recently committed suicide. In poem after poem we see how Hiskes loves people more than poems—though it's clear he also knows how poetry (and literature) can be used to show one's love for people.

The second book, *Final Exam*, appeared in my mailbox just a couple of weeks ago, and for a few minutes I had no idea why it had been sent to me. No explanatory note accompanied it. But then I remembered that well over a year earlier someone named Barry Koops had called me and asked permission to use two of my poems in an anthology of poems about teachers and their students that he was assembling. Of course, I quickly gave my permission.

The collection contains 85 poems written by 65 different poets. As I perused the index, I saw names like Jane Kenyon, Billy Collins, Ted Kooser, Theodore Roethke, Carl Sandberg, William Stafford, Denise Levertov, Sharon Olds, and many more—a virtual Who's Who of American Poetry over the last hundred years—with a few major English poets thrown in for good measure. Three American novelists also had a poem, including John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Louise Erdrich.You might ask "And how, David Schelhaas, did you come to reside in such elite company?" If I tell you that Stan Wiersma (Sietze Buining), Rod Jellema, Randall VanderMey, and Carl Kromminga also have poems included in this anthology, and if you have a Calvin College connection of some kind, you may have figured out that the editor of this collection, Barry Koops, is a Calvin graduate who found a few poets among his fellow alumni.

But, what a diverse group of poets and what a deluge of school poems for high school and college teachers to have at their fingertips! Some of these poems have been favorites of mine for decades, like John Ciardi's "On Flunking a Nice Boy out of School," which begins with these startling lines:

I wish I could teach you how ugly
decency and humility can be when they are not
the election of a contained mind but only
the defenses of an incompetent.

Or consider the last lines of Linda Pastan's "25th High School Reunion":

Look! We have all
turned into
ourselves.

There were many poems I did not know. Andrew Hudgins' "The Benedictine Hand" tells the story of a teacher who, while demonstrating how to "push the glass tube through the stopper," severs the median nerve of her hand, but instead of running from the room to care for it as the blood dribbles out, she calmly demonstrates what she has done, telling her students she now has what is called the Benedictine hand: "She held two fingers up as if to bless us." Then she leaves the room. Nor do the boys in the classroom ever forget how she held out her hand when she "named it, explained it, and blessed us with [her] error."

I could go on and on. You will want to buy this book, you who were students at one time and many of you who are, or were, teachers. Don't try to read it straight through. Meander. Read slowly. Read a poem two or three times. Put it away for a few days and then open it again.

I predict it will contribute to your happiness.